

Character Clues

Part One: Characters' Actions

We've talked about how a character's actions can tell us something about him or her. In each of the following selections consider carefully the actions of the specified character. On the basis of those details, decide what we learn about the character in question. On your own paper write the major characteristic(s) of this character. Defend your answer by citing specifics.

1. Joan

It was a cold rainy day. Joan heard a whimpering from behind the dented, empty garbage can. She walked over to the sound, unsuccessfully attempting to avoid the mud puddles that were in her way. She saw a small dog, its hair filthy and matted. Quickly she scooped it up, hugging it against her newly dry-cleaned coat.

2. Peter

Peter was one of the most popular students in the school. He was captain of the football team and president of the student council. For a long time Katy had liked Peter, but from afar, for she was very shy. A week before the turn-about dance, Katy, after building up her courage for weeks, asked Peter to go with her. He looked at her, smiled, and explained that he already had a date. Katy's face fell. Peter noticed her look. He then asked her to a movie the next week.

3. Lisa

Lisa pressed her lips together after applying fresh lip gloss. She walked quickly down the hall, her purse swaying at her side. She knew that eyes were on her and she smiled. When she passed the glass showcase, she turned and smiled at her reflection. She smoothed out the one wrinkle in her skirt and walked on.

Part Two: Characters' Language

We've talked about how a character's language tells us something about him or her. In each of the following selections consider carefully the language of the specified character. On the basis of those details decide what we learn about the character in question. On your own paper write the major characteristic(s) of this character. Defend your answer by citing specifics.

1. Mr. Smith

Mr. Smith had been teaching school for 15 years. On the day of a scheduled spelling test, the class took five minutes to settle down. He said: "Shut up! Now! I'm sick to death of you talking. If you don't shut up, I'm tellin' you...I...I...I...Shut up!"

2. Julie

Julie was a new student in freshman composition. Ms. Jones, her teacher, asked her to introduce herself to the class. Julie said, "For the last several years I have been residing in Los Angeles, California. My primary sources of relaxation there were ballet dancing and attending art galleries. I hope to continue these pursuits in my new home. Thank you."

3. Freddy

"Oh man, I'm tellin' you, man, it was the best, man. When they came out, the lights go down and then the lasers shootin' all over the place. Totally awesome. And then these awesome speakers, man, unbelievable. The best."

Part Three: Characters' Thoughts

We've talked about how a character's thoughts can tell us something about him or her. In each of the following selections consider carefully the thoughts of the specified character. On the basis of those details, decide what we learn about the character in question. On your own paper write the major characteristic(s) of this character. Defend your answer by citing specifics.

1. Tom

It seemed the class would never end. Tom's mind began wandering. He thought about that big problem in the cafeteria. At least Tom thought of it as a big problem. He just couldn't seem to decide what he wanted in the lunch line. The line must have been a mile long and they were all laughing. "I'll never go back," thought Tom.

2. Ed

Ed had been sitting next to Kris all semester. She was the most popular girl in the school. And the nicest, thought Ed. Ed himself was quiet and serious, a good student. He was friendly but had few real friends. The Homecoming Dance was coming up. It took all of Ed's courage to approach Kris. "Kris, you know next Saturday, well the dance is coming up."

"Umm, it is. But I'm, well, I'm, ahh, busy. And...I can't get out of it.... Sorry."

"That's OK. I know you must keep a busy schedule," Ed said. And then he thought, "Wow, she didn't say no. She must like me. Maybe the Winter Ball."

3. Lisa

As Lisa walked the aisle of the store, she thought back to her years when her career was just beginning, when food shopping was unnecessary because she went out to eat so often. She remembered going out every night, meeting new men. They were enthralled. Jake was enthralled. He was so romantic ten years ago, she thought. Things were great ten years ago.

Part Four: Characters' Body Language

Another clue that tells about characters is their body language. In each of the following selections consider carefully the body language of the specified character. On the basis of those details, decide what we learn about the character in question. On your own paper write the major characteristic(s) of this character. Defend your answer by citing specifics.

1. Sam

Everyone was there. Of course, it was the first dance of junior night. Sam watched from the corner. He held his hands behind him, occasionally bouncing them to the rhythm of the band. When laughing couples passed him, he dropped his eyes and held his breath.

2. Sharon

The whole table was laughing, except Sharon. Frank, an EMS student, had just stumbled by, spilling his milk all over his tray. The laughter continued as the girl watched him try to clean it up. Sharon's eyes flashed around the table. Her jaw was set tightly and a vein stood out in her neck. She clutched her books tightly to her chest.

3. Will

The oak door of the dean's office was closed. Will sat outside. He tapped his feet quickly, one after the other. His eyes darted about. His lips were dry, so he licked them constantly.

Part Five: Physical Descriptions

A character's physical description can also tell us something about him or her. In each of the following selections consider carefully the physical description of the specified character. On the basis of those details, decide what we learn about the character in question. On your own paper write the major characteristic(s) of this character. Defend your answer by citing specifics.

1. Pete

When you looked at Pete, the first thing you noticed were those crazy glasses. He was a little guy but his glasses were huge. Really big and really black, and usually broken and stuck together with some kind of tape. It's because of those glasses that we called him "owl-eyes." But if you could look past them, you'd notice other things too, like the crooked teeth that were usually in a smile and those crazy freckles that dotted his face. And his eyes themselves, a really warm brown.

2. Joanne

She wore not the slightest bit of makeup. Her eyes, blue, round, and enormous, dominated her face. She seemed never to blink. She parted her hair down the middle. Its ends hung softly around her shoulders. Though she was nearly 40, she had no wrinkles. Her faded jeans and blue denim work shirt were clean, though they were worn.

3. Annie

These eyebrows weren't Annie's. Hers had been plucked and new ones drawn in at a more radical angle, an angle repeated by the line of her hair, which was pulled severely off to one side. Her lips were painted a deep red. Her brown eyes were highlighted by silver stars carefully affixed to her enormously high cheekbones.

Part Six: How Others Relate to Characters

Another way to learn about characters is how they relate or compare to other characters. In each of the following selections, pay attention to the other characters. On the basis of those details, decide what we learn about the character in question. On your own paper write the major characteristic(s) of the specified character. Defend your answer by citing specifics.

1. Bradley

The cafeteria was packed. Ten to twelve people were crowded around tables designed to seat eight. The chatter of conversation and the clicks of glasses and silverware were a symphony in disarray. But when Bradley entered the cafeteria, conversation stopped. Four freshman boys stuffed half-finished lunches into paper bags and left. Bradley sat down, looked about, and smiled.

2. Jennifer

Every year the Women's Club offered one college scholarship. All of the brightest and most active girls at the high school applied for the award. The day of the scholarship presentation was a tense one for all of the applicants. At 7:30 that evening, one girl would receive a scholarship that might be the beginning of a successful life. Finally, the announcement came.

"We are proud to announce the winner of this year's scholarship: Ms. Jennifer Randall." The crowd burst into applause. Girls who lost looked at each other, nodded, and smiled. As Jennifer received her check, she also received a standing ovation.

3. Jesse

They had been losing close games all season, so when they fell behind by a run, the crowd groaned. Looking out into the field, the coach saw players with their heads down. The team was quiet except for one voice that carried in from right field. "All right, all right." We'll get these guys. Get 'em out now, and I'll get things started."

"Jesse," the coach thought. "She's leading off next inning. She'll probably get things going."